

## **The role of social media in the proliferation and promotion of Brand Activism**

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## **O papel das redes sociais na proliferação e incentivo do Ativismo de Marca**

**Resumo** (PT): Apesar da relevância e atualidade do ativismo de marca, poucas são as investigações teóricas que se debruçam sobre as origens desse conceito e, principalmente, sobre o papel que as redes sociais desempenharam na sua proliferação e incentivo. Esta extensa revisão de literatura, baseada nos artigos mais proeminentes publicados na área da especialidade, investiga e discute o papel dos avanços tecnológicos, e particularmente da popularização do uso de redes sociais, na proliferação do ativismo de marca a nível mundial. Do mesmo modo, o conceito de ativismo de marca é abordado como uma nova tendência na comunicação estratégica entre marcas e *stakeholders*, partindo-se de exemplos reais de campanhas de ativismo de marca para apresentar um quadro atual da aplicação deste conceito, tanto online como offline.

*Palavras-chave* (max. 5): Ativismo de Marca; Redes sociais; Ciberativismo; Cidadania ativa.

## **The role of social media in the proliferation and promotion of Brand Activism**

**Abstract** (EN): Despite the relevance and actuality of brand activism, there are few theoretical investigations about the origins of this concept, and particularly about the role that social networks played in its proliferation and encouragement. This extensive literature review, based on the most prominent articles published in this field of expertise, investigates and discusses the role of technological advances, and particularly the role of the popularization of the use of social networks, in the proliferation of brand activism worldwide. Likewise, the concept of brand activism as a new trend in strategic communication between brands and stakeholders is explored, giving real examples of brand activism campaigns to present a current picture of the application of this concept, both online and offline.

*Keywords* (up to 5): Brand Activism; Social Networks; Cyberactivism; Active citizenship.

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## **Introduction**

The World Wide Web, described by Tim Berners-Lee in 1995, made it possible for ordinary people to use the Internet, ending the restricted use of this resource by certain groups of power, such as military and academic groups. This achievement enabled millions of users to access the same information and to connect continuously and across borders (Cerf et al., 2009).

The faster transmission of information and the greater ease of communication between people had impacts on the spread of broad social phenomena, namely in the creation, strengthening and proliferation of diverse activist movements (Seelig et al., 2019). Since the turn of the century, the Internet has started to be used for activism practices, with groups or virtual communities addressing various social issues and demanding the support of public and private organizations to solve such problems, whether they are government agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or companies (Castells, 2004; Mazurek, 2009). The strength that activist movements gained in the online world led, years later, to the perception that companies also have a duty to take a more active role in society by participating and contributing to the social debate on these subjects (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Palonka & Porębska-Miąc, 2013).

Currently, there are several brands addressing and contributing to activist causes, through both online communication campaigns and offline actions. This phenomenon gave rise to the so-called brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Sarkar and Kotler (2018) consider that brand activism corresponds to a transformation in marketing, which has abandoned good intentions to take action, promoting issues not related to the company's value chain and expanding the company's range of values to include key social issues. As a current and growing phenomenon, brand activism is gaining increasing importance in the business and academic world, despite the prevailing large research gap on the subject (Camarota & Marino, 2021; Eilert & Cherup, 2020).

Based on an extensive literature review and concrete examples, this investigation seeks to address and debate how social networks were and are an important vehicle for the emergence and dissemination of brand activism. The article begins by describing brand activism as a new phenomenon, then it discusses the fundamental role that social networks had in its emergence and proliferation, and how these social platforms are currently used by brands to communicate their position on relevant social issues. Finally, the article concludes by discussing the role of social networks as a dual platform, which presents itself as a lever for the emergence of brand activism and as one of the most important means for brands to develop actions to fight for sociopolitical changes. The way in which social networks can be effectively used by brands to take a stance on the most current social issues is also discussed.

### **1. Brand activism as a new phenomenon**

Sarkar and Kotler (2018, p. 570) define brand activism as the “business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society”. Hodgson and Brooks (2007) add that firms can act as real activists by expressing, criticizing, shaping, connecting and affecting social relations and society towards a better world. In this sense, the main purpose of brand activism is to increase awareness and encourage

behavioral and sociopolitical change (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) through advertising campaigns and concrete actions created and sustained by political values (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). However, brands embrace activist causes not by aspiring to constitute themselves as a regulated political entity, but by aiming at a connection with the public based on specific values, through constant involvement with progressive movements and communities (Carroll & Hackett, 2006).

Brand activism is an evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which highlights that organizations have broader responsibilities towards society that go beyond business profitability and wealth creation (e.g., Carroll, 1991; Chernev & Blair, 2015; Godfrey & Hatch, 2006; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). However, while CSR programs are marketing-driven or corporate-driven, with a high fit between corporate activities and the chosen social issue (de Bakker & den Hond, 2008), brand activism is driven by social values, addressing the biggest and most pressing issues facing society (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), even if these are often not directly linked to an organization's core business (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Thus, the domains under the umbrella of brand activism can involve a wide range of political, social, economic, legal, environmental and workplace causes (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Another difference between brand activism and CSR or Cause-Related Marketing campaigns is that the latter typically concern generally accepted, non-divisive social issues, being unlikely to elicit a negative response from stakeholders, while the topics addressed by brand activist campaigns, such as deforestation, racism, sexism or voting rights, are often controversial and polarized, generating fervorous positive and negative responses (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Christian Toit (2016) posits that companies are increasingly taking an active position on social issues, which reflects their values as brands, even risking displeasing some segments of their stakeholders. In fact, by addressing controversial and scrutinized topics that may interfere with the brand image and reputation, brand activism involves greater uncertainty and risk than CSR or Cause-Related Marketing campaigns, leading to the need for brands to exhibit a high degree of message-practice alignment (Mirzaei, Wilkie, & Siuki, 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This is also because stakeholders increasingly question the true motivation of brands to get involved in social problems (Vredenburg et al., 2018), accusing brands of inauthenticity if they believe brands' involvement in social issues is mainly to increase their performance (Edelman, 2019; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

This new phenomenon, already quite visible in the business world and increasingly studied by academia (e.g., Eyada, 2020 ; Koch, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar and Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020), has emerged and evolved from the social, political, economic, technological and market developments of the last decades, which have made it increasingly important for brands to participate in solving social problems. Factors such as globalization, the development of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), the greater power of companies and the greater difficulty to distinguish between brands in the market using factors such as quality or price, have changed social dynamics and the expectations that stakeholders have in relation to brands, demanding a stronger role for brands in society (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Moorman, 2020; Shetty, Nagendra, & Anand, 2019). For instance, today 62% of customers expect companies to take a stand on social issues and 53% of them are likely to complain if they are unhappy with a brand's messages or actions regarding social causes. Likewise, 47% admit switching to other brands and 17% may not come back (Accenture, 2019). Younger generations, such as generation Y

and Z, are more ethically driven and show increasing concerns about the social and environmental policies of companies (Eyada, 2020). These consumers gained a greater awareness of the sociopolitical nature of consumption, expressing their civic positioning through their consumption choices (Schmidt et al., 2022). This contributed to the emergence of the so-called conscious consumption, characterized as being socially responsible, environmentally friendly and ethical (Roux & Nantel, 2009), which also led companies to feel the duty to renew their positions and to adopt social purposes.

One of the contributing factors to these changes was the emergence and recurrent use of social networks, which created a space conducive to information sharing and debate, in which brands are invited to participate (Dauvergne, 2017; Shah, Sivitanides, & Mehta, 2013; Wright, 2020). At the same time, the dynamics of social networks also imposed them as a convenient arena to the dissemination of activist brand actions (Gray, 2019; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).

## **2. The impact of social media on brand activism**

The use of the Web on a global scale and the successive technological developments in the last decades brought profound economic, political, cultural and social changes. These changes marked the shift from an industrial society to an information society, in which information becomes one of the most important parts of contemporary life, cultural circulation is expanded and geographical boundaries are blurred (Webster, 2003). The Information Society - or the so-called Network Society - was thus constituted as a permanently connected and active society, characterized by co-production and feedback relationships, in which people use technological means to organize themselves according to their specific values, affinities and interests (Castells, 2004).

At the same time, the arrival of Web 2.0 contributed to a more active and equitable use of the Web and the participation in it by ordinary citizens, mainly through the popularization of digital infrastructures such as blogs, online chats, forums, Wikis, video platforms and social networks, enabling Web users to bidirectionally communicate on a large scale. In addition, there were several developments in the search engines field, which compiled and organized the information that circulated on the Web (Aghaei, Nematbakhsh, & Farsani, 2012). Such platforms constituted an alternative to the mass and unidirectional communication feature of traditional media, starting to privilege peer-to-peer communication (either one-to-one or many-to-many) carried out globally and horizontally, that is, without hierarchical barriers (Livingstone, 2004). This not only empowered people to be heard by a wider audience, but also allowed for an increasingly closer and interactive relationship between audiences and various social organizations, such as companies (López et al., 2016, Mazurek, 2009).

The bidirectional and global communication provided by Web 2.0 thus led to profound changes in the public behavior. By beginning to participate in communication exchanges, the public became both a producer and consumer of content, giving rise to the so-called Prosumer - a new consumer that distinguishes itself by benefiting from a greater power of influence over its own purchasing decisions and over the decisions of others, being able to quickly and easily share his experiences with a large number of people (Fine, Girona, & Petrescu, 2017). This "participatory culture", in which individuals find few barriers to knowledge production and information dissemination (Jenkins, 2007), has gained a leading role in consumer purchasing decisions, as well as

in the consumer's social behavior, for example at the level of activism and anti-consumption practices (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2021), with social media being heavily used by consumers, activists and other stakeholders to approach brands about their conduct and social policies (Dauvergne, 2017).

As personalized information sources and a stage conducive to closer, interactive and interdependent relationships between brands and stakeholders, social media played a leading role in making companies aware of the duty and need to adopt a more active role in society, namely to comment on relevant social and political issues (Moorman, 2020; Toit, 2016). In fact, social networks themselves and microblogging have become a powerful force in terms of political and social emancipation (Milan, 2013). The fast and easy economic interactions, made possible by Web 2.0, enabled cyberspace to become a place full of "virtual communities", characterized by the sharing of common interests and an intrinsic connection between members that involves rituals, norms and duties (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008), turning the Internet into a means of social transformation and of discontent disclosure. According to Castells (2004), virtual communities have, more than any other, the ability to strengthen social movements around cultural values, as they find on the Internet a means of communication that allows them to share their ideas on a global scale and, thus, more easily achieve their goals.

Thus, at the turn of the century, social networks began to be heavily used by groups of activists who had previously focused on using physical supports and locations to develop activism actions. Through the use of social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter, as well as other online resources, like blogs and websites, activism gained a new stage that allowed these social movements to share alternative information with a much wider audience and organize online and offline protests and boycotts on a larger scale (Campos, Pereira, & Simões, 2016). In addition, the use of these online resources for activism also facilitates the education of the public, allows greater fundraising for the defended causes, eases the formation of coalitions without geographical borders and the distribution of petitions and action alerts, simplifies the planning and coordination of regional or international events and the mobilization and recruitment of new activists and supporters, and promotes the creation of more activist movements, given the few resources and investment needed (Campos, Pereira, & Simões, 2016; Dauvergne, 2017; Seelig et al., 2019; Shah, Sivitanides, & Mehta, 2013).

At this point, blogs also began to be used by activists as a low risk and low investment tool to reach more people and establish relationships between members who share the same ideas (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). The use of blogs was due to the fact that these platforms provide deeper and lasting reflection, unlike social networks that favor the development of "viral" episodes and instant indignation to the detriment of a sustained debate, but which, in turn, reach a higher and faster mobilization than blogs (Campos, Pereira, & Simões, 2016).

These online movements were popularized in the first decade of the 2000s, with movements against the Iraq war and alterglobalization (Juris, 2008), but quickly extended to "anti-brand movements", including boycotting and online anti-brand activism, and to "anti-brand communities", with an increasing number of activists imposing that organizations, especially multinationals, begin to demonstrate more responsibility for the environmental and social consequences of their value chain activities, as well as in the resolution of political and social issues (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Kozinets, 2014; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Romani et al., 2015; Stolle &

Micheletti, 2015). For instance, feelings of hate, including disgust, anger/fear, and contempt, were found to arise in consumers in response to moral violations of brands (Romani et al., 2015). Social media has enabled anti-brand communities to proliferate online at an unprecedented level, by providing faster, more convenient and anonymous methods of communication, autonomous of geographic spaces and time zones, as well as new forms of protest, organization, cooperation and coalition creation (Dauvergne, 2017; Shah, Sivitanides, & Mehta, 2013), with the majority of anti-brand communities being created and communicating only in the cyberspace (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).

Benkler (2006) and Kirkpatrick (2008) believe that digital activism can change traditional power hierarchies and empower citizens through the transmission of alternative content, as well as change the distribution of a top-to-bottom power structure to an authority defined by peer-to-peer relationships. In fact, social media enabled civil society to expose corporate practices and misconduct to wider publics (Bennett, 2005), becoming more difficult for corporate actors to hide their activities and control the disclosure of information (Chouliaraki & Morsing, 2010; Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014). This has been shown to have great potential to impact companies in reputational and economic terms (King, 2008; Whelan, Moon, & Grant, 2013). According to Berthon et al. (2012), on social networks there is a transition of power from companies to the community, since everyone can create content and information and share it among network users. While recognizing that such civic empowerment is partially conditioned by the corporations and governments which control social media, Whelan, Moon and Grant (2013) argue that these social platforms have created broader public arenas of citizenship in which citizens gain a greater capacity to create, debate and publicize CSR issues.

Online actions to pressure brands to support local communities (Shah, Sivitanides, & Mehta, 2013), invest in effective environmental policies (Dauvergne, 2017) or take responsibility in the fight against racial inequality (Wright, 2020), sometimes accompanied by public protests, started to become frequent and to have a huge reach, with activists opposing brands considered irresponsible towards society and praising or creating partnerships with brands considered to be pioneers in supporting the defended movements (Dauvergne, 2017). For instance, generation Y - the so-called Millennials -, currently having a major impact on the markets and a constant presence on digital platforms, require a greater contribution from companies in promoting social dialogue. In fact, two thirds of these consumers use social networks to get involved or approach companies about their social responsibility actions (Cone Communications, 2015).

In addition to requiring brands to support social movements, people even see brands as a symbol of power vis-à-vis the government and a large part believe that brands are a more powerful force for societal change than the government. According to a study conducted in 2018 by Edelman, an American public relations and marketing consultancy firm, 53% of consumers surveyed believe that brands can take more effective action in solving social problems than the government and 54% believe it is easier for people to get brands to address social problems than to get government to act. At the same time, 64% of consumers choose to support or boycott a brand based solely on its position on social and political issues (Edelman, 2018). For their part, 48% of Millennial employees have spoken up to support or criticize their employer's actions over a controversial issue that affects society (Weber Shandwick, 2019), which has been leading stockholders to show a preference for socially responsible companies (Eccles & Klimenko, 2019).

In this sense, brand activism arises from the growing expectation of stakeholders that companies take public positions on relevant social issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Since the mid-2000s, brands realized the importance of not only committing to the demands of activists and stakeholders, but also of being involved with these causes, namely by adjusting certain practices used in production, distribution and sales activities, entering into partnerships with NGOs and exposing a public stance in relation to relevant and current social issues (Dauvergne, 2017). While the Internet was a strong driver for these corporate conducts, it also became one of the most important means for brand activism actions, with brands becoming increasingly aware and interested in the use of digital technologies to get involved in the struggle for positive sociopolitical changes (Shah, Sivitanides, & Mehta, 2013).

### **3. Social networks as a stage for activism campaigns**

In a context of increasing use of the Web by a mass audience, the Internet came to be seen as an indispensable medium for communication between brands and their stakeholders. Currently, one of the main platforms on which this relationship is established is social networks. If brand messages were previously transmitted using traditional tactics, such as public relations, advertising, marketing and sales promotion (Mangold & Fauld, 2009), and the possibility of feedback was very limited, the features of social networks have enabled companies to establish closer relationships with their stakeholders (López et al., 2016).

In truth, the public began to interfere in all marketing activities and business conducts by having a greater ability to scrutinize corporate activities and to transmit their opinions about brands in the online world quickly, directly and with a wide reach (Mazurek, 2009). Consequently, social networks have not only become a personalized information source for the consumer and other stakeholders (Ansari, Essegaiier, & Kohli, 2000), capable of shaping their opinions and attitudes towards a brand, product or service (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), but they also constitute a source of information for brands, in the sense that stakeholders share data about themselves and their reality with companies (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Palonka & Porebska-Miąc, 2013). As such, organizations are also able to use social media as a broad social listening tool to understand their stakeholders and more quickly adapt corporate conduct to their expectations and demands. This interaction between companies and stakeholders, often carried out directly and individually (Palonka & Porebska-Miąc, 2013), is one of the characteristics that most distinguishes social networks as a digital communication platform, as it allows both parties to act on each other. Such process is, however, always dependent not only on the effectiveness of the messages transmitted, but also on the degree of influence to which both sides are synchronized (Liu & Shrum, 2002).

In this sense, despite the fact that social media gives a greater power to anti-brand groups by allowing a greater concentration and unification of members with a common negative stance towards one or more brands and giving them the ability to damage the company name (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006), it is also true that online anti-brand communities and social media in general contributed to companies renewing not only its activities but also its positions and purposes as brands (Holt, 2002). In fact, brands started to use the Internet as an “open forum” to gain insights and transform a possible negative impact into opportunities to improve their conduct and communication,



especially in social terms (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Shah, Sivitanides, & Mehta, 2013).

Thus, brand movements and campaigns began to emerge in digital media, promoting the company values and including key social issues (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). These campaigns include issues such as environmental problems, racism, public health, immigration or even minority rights (Moorman, 2020; Toit, 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020). To put these brand activism strategies into practice, an important distribution channel is precisely social networks. From these channels, brands are able to reach a wide audience (Gray, 2019), more easily spreading word-of-mouth about the campaign (Corcoran, Newman, & Devasagayam, 2016) and increasing its potential to go viral (Lee & Yoon, 2020). In addition, social networks are a space where users can interact directly with brands and other network members on these issues, allowing the brand to become aware almost in real time of how their campaigns are being perceived through the community reaction on these platforms (Gray, 2019).

A significant and current example of these brand activism movements was Airbnb's stance on Donald Trump's anti-immigration measures, implemented in January 2017. These measures severely restricted the possibility of travel and immigration to the United States of America (USA) of citizens from various largely Muslim countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa and suspended the Refugee Admissions Program in the USA for 120 days. Airbnb used its digital platforms and social networks to initiate the "We accept" campaign, a movement in defense of acceptance between people, promoting dialogue and inviting the public to react to the new measure. The company encouraged its consumers to make their homes available to people who were unable to travel to the United States and to make donations to refugee aid organizations. At the same time, Airbnb led by example by hosting refugees and citizens barred from entering the USA at the time (Airbnb, 2017a). In addition, the brand pledged to offer short-term accommodation to 100,000 people in need over the next five years and to donate \$4 million over the next four years to the International Rescue Committee, which supports the most urgent needs of the displaced worldwide (Airbnb, 2017a). With this activism movement, Airbnb achieved a huge reach on social networks, with the hashtag #weaccept being the most used on Twitter during the Super Bowl (the event in which the campaign was publicized), with about 33 thousand tweets during the first half of the game. The campaign, published by the brand on its social media, also received over 500 thousand likes and was shared more than 100 thousand times, including by users belonging to a more conservative audience (Airbnb, 2017b). Based on an internal monitoring by Airbnb, it was possible to perceive that the public reaction to the campaign was 85% favorable. Likewise, the public responded strongly to the brand's call to accommodate displaced populations, with more than 15,400 enrollments by volunteers willing to welcome these people into their homes (Airbnb, 2017b).

Several other examples of brand activism arose with the global spread of the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of African-American George Floyd, in May 2020. Floyd's tragic death, strangled by a police officer who knelt on his neck for more than 8 minutes after approaching Floyd for allegedly trying to use a fake twenty dollar banknote in a supermarket, accelerated public feeling around the need for society and brands to face systemic racism (Gray, 2019). Brands like Nike and Procter & Gamble, previously publicly positioned as being against racism, proactively responded to what happened in the USA. After Floyd's death, Nike changed its slogan (Just Do It) for the first time to "Don't Do It", in a video shared on the brand's social networks appealing its consumers not to be indifferent to racism in the USA and to join the protests that were

taking place in several states - a message shared on Twitter even by its biggest competitor, Adidas. At the same time, the brand committed to investing 40 million dollars during the next four years in support of the black community in the USA, namely by supporting organizations that work with social justice, education and racial inequality in America (Nike, 2020). Procter & Gamble (2020) also started a campaign on its social networks and used its online platforms to share materials with its consumers and the community (documents, films, articles, books, TedTalks, podcasts, Instagram profiles of black activists, organizations and projects that support the black community or even guides for teachers to acquire techniques to teach about tolerance), as a way to promote dialogue and people's action on this topic.

Still on the subject of racism, months before the controversial death of George Floyd in the USA, Malian football player Moussa Marega was the victim of racist insults during a football game in Portugal, leading the player to abandon the game. In response, Portuguese beer brands Sagres and Super Bock, official sponsors of several national football teams, leagues and cups, joined the anti-racist protests by uniting in a viral publication on social networks in which the two competing beers appear together, passing the same message: "Against racism, there are no rivals", a movement that led to hundreds of shares and comments on social networks (Marcela, 2020).

These examples show how the Internet and digital platforms can be positively used to address important social issues and to promote positive socialpolitical change. According to Gray (2019), social media is nowadays a major distribution outlet for brand activism, contributing to the societal dialogue in general and increasing the resonance of the advocated issue. Digital platforms thus emerge as a powerful complement to maximize the reach and effectiveness of brand activism, with brand combining online messages with offline actions that support the same causes, as seen above. This alignment of a brand's activism messages in the traditional and digital media with factual prosocial corporate practices is increasingly important for brand activism to be considered authentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020). With the level of controversy that many social issues reach today, especially on social media, and as stakeholders expectations rise for brands to join social movements, supporting poorly or refraining from commenting certain issues can have very negative impacts for a company (Gray, 2019). So, if a brand chooses to participate in a social debate, it needs to ensure that it has the internal conditions to do so, creating an integrated strategy that goes beyond social media in order to be effective (Moorman, 2020; Shah, Sivitanides, & Mehta, 2013). Furthermore, in the face of a skeptical consumer, it is also crucial that brands ensure a congruence/adequacy of their identity, values and social mission with the defended cause (Guzmán & Davis, 2017). Higher levels of fit allow stakeholders to more easily understand the connection between the brand and the cause, viewing the brand's efforts as more authentic. As such, a stance needs to be rooted in a long-term commitment and aligned with the brand's strategy and values, thereby increasing the likelihood of stakeholders responding favorably to the company's involvement in activism (Schmidt et al., 2022).

## **Conclusion**

The emergence of the Web 2.0, and particularly social networks, influenced the methods by which sociopolitical movements are prepared and implemented. The bidirectional dynamics of social networks and their use by the common citizen led to

profound economic, cultural, political and social transformations, such as the intensification of globalization, and constituted an alternative to the mass communication of traditional media. These social platforms led to the reduction of barriers between private and public issues, as well as to quick and easy economic interactions, as well as greater opportunities for civic expression, which resulted in the creation of multiple virtual communities with common interests and with greater capacity to initiate or strengthen social movements worldwide. If initially these movements had political causes as their main focus, later on they became quite relevant for changing corporate agendas, namely in terms of corporate social and environmental practices and in the role of business in the support for certain activist causes. Social networks have thus empowered citizens, who managed not only to approach brands directly, but also to make their opinions on corporate practices reach a much larger audience. As brands began to receive direct feedback from stakeholders through digital platforms, they also realized the possible negative impacts of not meeting their expectations.

The bidirectional communication and the reciprocal relationships between brands and stakeholders on social networks thus played a major role in the emergence and promotion of brand activism, with numerous brands addressing social problems in their campaigns and acting towards their resolution. While being a catalyst for brand activism, social networks also became one of the most important spaces for brands to expose their support to activist causes. Social platforms like Facebook and Twitter are currently used by a wide variety of mainstream brands to address controversial issues, such as the climate crisis, Me Too or the Black Lives Matter movement, to define problems of social interest and to focus on doing social good. However, while these campaigns can be well received by most stakeholders, they can also generate huge backlash from others. This is because most of the topics addressed by brand activism campaigns are quite controversial and polarized, generating strong responses from the public, an effect that is also amplified by social networks. As such, brands should use social media as a way of social listening, understanding which social issues are the most addressed by their main audiences, such as consumers and the community in general, in order to align their moral foundations with those of the stakeholders in all their activist messages. As brand activism campaigns and corporate activities are increasingly scrutinized in the digital world, companies must therefore assume a coherent message across all their social media platforms, maintaining an integrated communication over time. In the same way, companies should combine activist advertisements with concrete actions in support of the defended causes, whether internally (e.g., changing production or recruitment practices) or externally (e.g., donating or lobbying for the causes). In addition, companies must continually monitor what is being said online about their conduct or about their activism campaigns to create a quick and effective response in the event of negatively judged activities. This can be done through public relations actions or by creating a specialized team to deal with sensitive activism issues in a coherent way and explain the brand's motivations to support a certain cause if necessary, thus avoiding bad publicity and negative word-of-mouth.

Despite the Internet's challenges to brand activism, in today's world, where stakeholders demand from brands a shared responsibility in addressing current activist causes, the potential of the Web cannot be ignored as a way of reaching a wider audience, informing and educating the public on topics that require the involvement of everyone - including companies - for their resolution.

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